

# 2019 California Wildfires: Brief Overview of FEMA Programs and Resources

November 1, 2019

## Introduction

This Insight provides a brief overview of current Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) declarations and federal assistance programs that may be available.

The National Weather Service (NWS) of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) provides [fire weather outlooks](#) intended to delineate areas of the continental United States where “pre-existing fuel conditions, combined with forecast weather conditions during the next eight days, will result in a significant threat for the ignitions and/or spread of wildfires.” These [conditions](#) involve combinations of periods of sustained (20 mph or greater) or higher wind gusts, relative humidity values at or below regional thresholds, and temperatures at or above 50°F occurring in areas that have dry fuels (e.g., brush, timber, or other ignitable vegetation).

[Santa Ana winds](#), where air moving from the desert toward the coast accelerates through gaps in the local terrain, typically occur between September and May in southwest California. These winds create especially favorable conditions for producing wildfires. NWS [reports](#) that various portions of California have experienced or are expected to experience weather conditions, including Santa Ana winds, which are conducive to igniting and spreading wildfires as well as making those wildfires difficult to suppress or contain. For the current fire weather outlook, see [NWS fire outlook page](#).

## Types of FEMA Assistance

Section 420 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act; P.L. 93-288, as amended; [42 U.S.C. §§5121 et seq.](#)) authorizes the President to declare a [Fire Management Assistance Grant](#) (FMAG). The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA’s) Regional Administrators have been delegated the authority to authorize an FMAG because of the need to expedite assistance when the threat of a major disaster exists. Once issued, FMAGs provide federal funding for [eligible work and costs](#), including [emergency protective measures](#) and [firefighting activities](#), such as the provision of equipment, supplies, personnel, and grants to state, local, and tribal governments for the

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11191

control, management, and mitigation of “any fire on public or private forest land or grassland that threatens such destruction as would constitute a major disaster.” [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program \(HMGP\)](#) funding is available according to a [sliding scale formula](#) based on the estimated total federal assistance per [FMAG](#) or major disaster declaration. FMAGs have been authorized in 2019 for multiple wildfires, including the [Kincade, Getty, Tick, Easy, Hill, 46, and Hillside Fires](#).

The President may later authorize an [emergency or major disaster declaration](#), if requested by the governor or Tribal Chief Executive of the affected state or Tribe, respectively. An [emergency declaration](#) supports state and local efforts to save lives, protect property, and lessen or avert the incident from becoming a major disaster. A [major disaster declaration](#) allows for a range of [federal assistance](#) programs to be made available to state and local governments, private nonprofit organizations, and individuals through FEMA and other federal agencies. FEMA provides three major categories of assistance for major disasters:

- [Public Assistance \(PA\)](#) provides grants to tribal, state, and local governments, and certain private nonprofit organizations, for emergency protective measures, debris removal, and repair or replacement of damaged public infrastructure.
- [Individual Assistance \(IA\)](#) provides aid to affected individuals and households, and can take the form of housing assistance, other needs assistance, crisis counseling, case management services, legal services, and disaster unemployment assistance.
- [Hazard Mitigation Assistance \(HMA\)](#) funds mitigation and resiliency projects and programs, typically across the entire state.

The forms of assistance authorized may vary by the [designated areas](#), per the [declaration](#) (subject to amendment).

## Wildfire Response

The federal government is also supporting the wildfire suppression efforts in California with many [federal deployable assets](#), including federal firefighting assets such as “[Hotshot](#)” crews. The national response to these and other ongoing fires is coordinated regionally through the [Northern and Southern California Geographic Coordination Centers](#) as well as through the [National Interagency Fire Center](#) and its [National Interagency Coordination Center](#).

The [California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection](#) is providing information on the [active incidents](#), including the [Kincade, Easy, Hill, 46, and Hillside Fires](#). The [Los Angeles Fire Department](#) is providing information on the [Getty Fire](#). Information includes evacuation warning and order updates, evacuation center locations, confirmed damage to property, injuries, and assigned resources and partners. Information on other fires may be available from the [Incident Information System website](#).

## National Flood Insurance Program

The [risk of flooding and mudflows increases significantly after a wildfire](#), as the vegetation that normally absorbs rainfall has been removed. Flooding and mudflows are not covered by most standard homeowners’ or renters’ insurance policies. Instead, flood insurance must be purchased as a separate policy. The [National Flood Insurance Program \(NFIP\)](#) is the primary source of flood insurance coverage for residential properties. [NFIP policies also cover damage due to mudflows](#). The NFIP may [waive the usual 30-day waiting period](#) for flood insurance to go into effect if the property is affected by flooding on burned federal land.

# Federal Funding for Disaster Response and Recovery

FEMA's [Disaster Relief Fund \(DRF\)](#) is the primary source of federal government resources for response and recovery activities. It is often used as an indicator of the overall availability of federal resources for response and recovery.

As a result of annual and supplemental appropriations provided from FY2017 through FY2020, as well as the current continuing resolution for FY2020, as of September 30, 2019, the DRF had almost \$28.3 billion in unobligated budget authority available for the costs of major disasters and \$509 million for the broad purposes of the Stafford Act, including FMAGs and work pursuant to emergency declarations. If these carryover funds are not sufficient, Section 133 of the FY2020 continuing resolution (P.L. 116-59) allows for additional resources to be apportioned to ensure that Stafford Act programs can be carried out.

## Resources

The following products provide additional information on wildfires and federal emergency management policy.

- CRS Report R41981, *Congressional Primer on Responding to Major Disasters and Emergencies*
- CRS Report R40884, *Wildfires: CRS Experts*
- CRS Report R43738, *Fire Management Assistance Grants: Frequently Asked Questions*

CRS In Focus IF10732, *Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery*

## Author Information

Elizabeth M. Webster, Coordinator  
Analyst in Emergency Management and Disaster Recovery

Natalie Keegan  
Analyst in American Federalism and Emergency Management Policy

Bruce R. Lindsay, Coordinator  
Analyst in American National Government

Eva Lipiec  
Analyst in Natural Resources Policy

Diane P. Horn  
Analyst in Flood Insurance and Emergency Management

William L. Painter  
Specialist in Homeland Security and Appropriations

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United

---

States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.